

LEGENDS OF INDIA

Muriel Wasi



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A Word to the Reader

Legends of India is a collection of well-known Indian myths and fables that is addressed primarily to young readers between twelve and sixteen years of age. It is directed, in the first instance, to Indian children to inform them of their own rich heritage. It is also addressed to children possibly in other age-groups, in other parts of the world, who may or may not have come across the legends elsewhere.

In collecting and generally re-telling them, the Narrator was concerned to offer in a small volume a portrait of India as she persists through the ages. The legends alternate between the joyful and the philosophic. We begin with the immortal "Ganga" and, as a special case, include as interlude the memorable excerpt from Jawaharlal Nehru's "Last Will" in order to underscore for children the enduring image of beauty, joy and life that the Ganga legend originally creates. Next comes "Yudhishtira and the Faithful Dog" that has all the seriousness of an Indian legend, on the approach to death, and the admixture of justice, humanity and courage that is part of the Indian tradition. There follows a light fable, in the manner of Aesop, from the *Panchatantra*, and this is offset by the most moving legend in the collection, "A Tola of Black Mustard Seeds," that has appeared and reappeared in all collections of the Buddha. It is re-told here at some length so as to emphasise the extraordinary poignancy and greatness of a prophet who was unwilling to be a miracle worker and wished to transmit a knowledge of life and death with compassion. Told by

the narrator in other parts of the world to children, adolescents and adults, this story has never failed to evoke a deep emotional response. While on a year's visit to the State of New York between 1964-65 the Narrator used this story again and again with students and teachers to convey impressionistically what is not easy to explain rationally or analytically. It was also used on educational television in New York with very satisfactory results.

There follow in the collection "Uma: The Golden One," re-told and amplified from the Upanishads, the touching story of "The Buddha and the Shepherd Boy," and several stories of wit, wisdom and robust common sense, all of which exemplify facets of the Indian tradition. Breaking the run of wit is a Buddha anecdote of the usual sensitivity, "The Old Woman and Her Half-Pomegranate," that is not unlike "The Widow's Mite" from the New Testament. Source material is varied. "Ganga" has been re-written from the original Annie Besant story; "Yudhisthira" has been taken bodily from the original by C. A. Kincaid. For the others Arnold's *Light of Asia* has been used, Rhyder's translation of *The Panchatantra* and Oroon Ghosh's *The Dance of Shiva*. To all these, the narrator is indebted for ideas and narrative. For the most part the stories have, however, been re-told. As suggested earlier, it is not easy to explain the more subtle nuances of a civilisation in purely rational or logical terms. In interpreting the thought, joyful and philosophic, that is distinctively Indian, though composed of the many streams that make India's civilisation today, at some point it becomes necessary to use a legend as an allegory. Those who have ears to hear will do so; those who listen will understand, perhaps at varying levels of maturity and

profundity, but nevertheless understand. As with other beautiful and enduring legends the world over – and the Commentary seeks to establish such a connection in ideas and ideals, truths and values – there are no national barriers to understanding. Even where cultural reactions may differ, the response to such legends as these is immediate and deep. This is the essential purpose in education of the present collection. It is intended to provoke questions that are never finally answered but that breed further questions in man's eternal search for the answers that underlie his values.

Muriel Wasi
Narrator

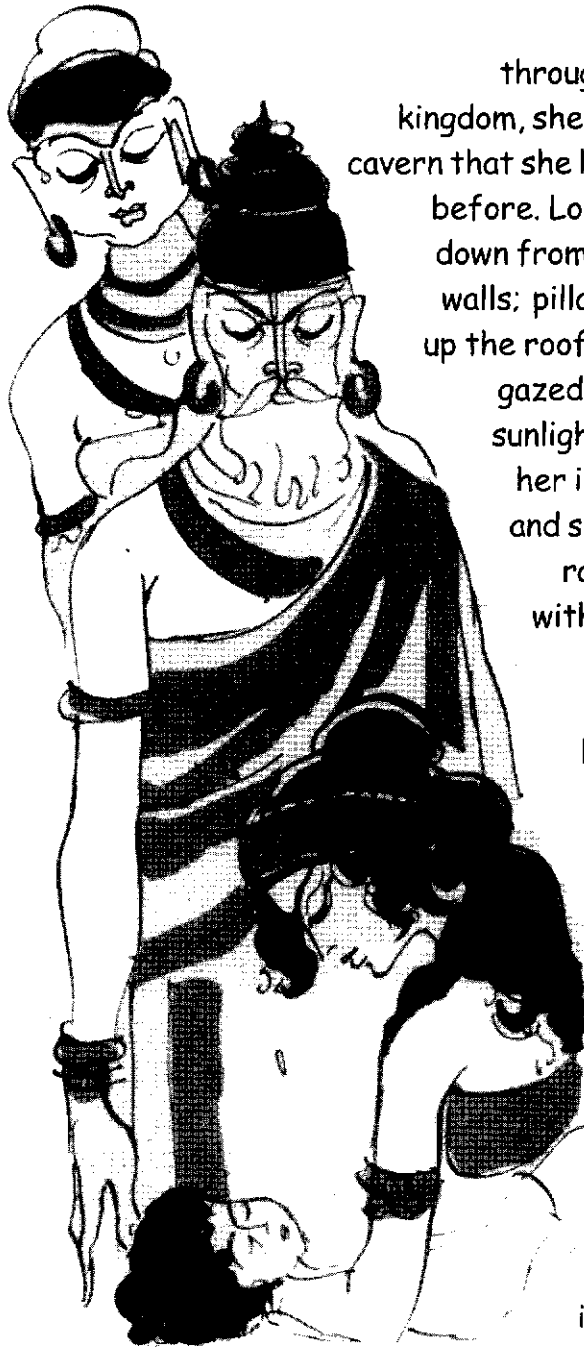


GANGA: THE RIVER MAID

Far away in the Himalaya mountains in the north of India, the great god Shiva slept. And as he slept, the winds blew and the snow fell and the ice settled on his face and head.

But Shiva was weary and continued to sleep as the sun blazed down on the plains and valleys of Hindustan and cruelly burned her grass and trees. For, at that time, there were no rivers to water the land. The people cried out in their anguish for water but the God, unmoved, slept.

In the mountains there lived a great king called Himavat, with his fair wife, Mena, and their lovely little daughter, Ganga. One day, as Ganga wandered



through her father's kingdom, she came to an ice cavern that she had never seen before. Long icicles hung down from the glittering walls; pillars of ice held up the roof, and as Ganga gazed at it, a ray of sunlight flashed past her into the cavern and she watched its rainbow colours with delight. This, she said to herself, is my kingdom, and I will stay here.

For days King Himavat and Queen Mena looked for their daughter and did not find her; but when they came to her ice cavern and

saw her happy to be alone in her rainbow shell, they forgave her and the three made their home there.

From time to time, King Himavat would go down to the plains of India, and whenever he returned from a journey, his heart was heavy and his face sad.

"What ails you?" asked Mena, and Ganga clambered upon her father's knee and said:

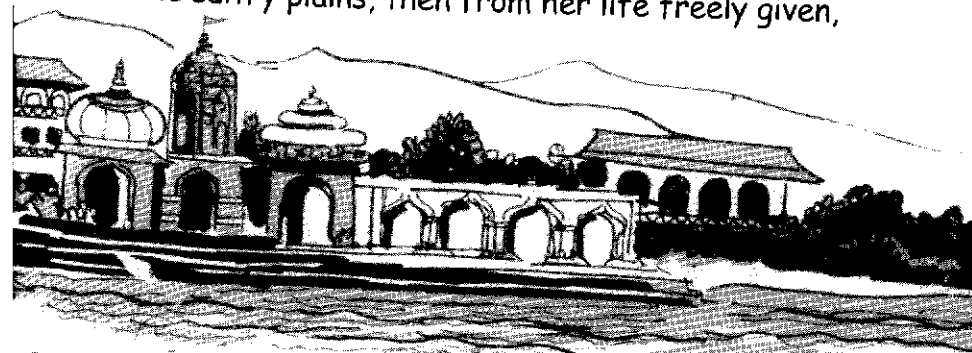
"What is it, father?"

The King said: "The land suffers for want of water; the crops shrivel and die; the cattle waste; men and women go thirsty to give water to their children. But Shiva sleeps and seems not to care for anyone."

Then Ganga said: "Can no one do anything about this?"

The King raised his heavy eyes and looked upon his child.

"Yes, Ganga," he replied, "There is help but it is hard to win. If a girl pure as ice and white as snow would leave her home and go down and dwell forever in the sultry plains, then from her life freely given,



would flow life for the perishing people and her name would be sacred and beloved to all in Hindustan."

Ganga knew that her father bade her make a big sacrifice, but she was still a little girl and she was in love with the beauty of her ice cavern, and the wail of mortal creatures did not reach her. So she said: "I won't go."

And still the cry of the dying people went up to the sky. Her father bade her go. Her mother, weeping, besought her to think of the life of men, but Ganga would not move. Then, one day Himavat came in with a baby, dying in his arms. The soft skin was blistered; the little lips were black and parched; the mouth was open; the eyes, fixed and glassy. Himavat laid the child on Ganga's lap.

"It is dying of thirst," he said.

Ganga bent over the little face and, as she did so, a drop of water fell from her hair on the parched lips. In an instant the flush of life returned to it. The baby opened his eyes and gurgled with joy. Ganga sprang to her feet.

"Father," she cried, "Mother, I will go if I can save children."

And as she spoke she went to the mouth of the ice cavern where she had dwelt in innocent but selfish joy, and there the miracle happened. The beautiful

little girl with golden bright hair and white hands vanished and, in her place, a stream of pure soft water, white-flecked with foam, danced on the golden bright sands and the water, as it ran, whispered:

"I am Ganga, Ganga, and I go to bless the thirsty plains and to bring water to dying children."

And wherever Ganga turned, flowers sprang up to welcome her; stately trees bowed down over her waters; fainting cattle grew strong; children played upon her banks; strong men bathed in her torrents and women washed themselves in her pools. Ganga, the Maid, had become Ganga, the Mother, the river of life and joy.

And this is why Ganga has become the symbol of life to Hindustan, and the Ganges the river of life. This is why men think that the Ganga, as she flows, murmurs: "To give oneself for others is duty; to spread happiness around one for others is joy." And this is why the Hindu, dying far from the sacred river, prays that his ashes may be thrown into the Ganga's red-brown depths, so that dying, he may return to the source of life.



JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S LAST WILL

I have received so much love and affection from the Indian people that nothing that I can do can repay even a small fraction of it, and indeed there can be no repayment of so precious a thing as affection.

"Many have been admired, some have been revered, but the affection of all classes of the Indian people has come to me in such abundant measure that I have been overwhelmed by it. I can only express the hope that in the remaining years I may live, I shall not be unworthy of my people and their affection.

"To my innumerable comrades and colleagues, I owe an even deeper debt

of gratitude. We have been joint partners in great undertakings and have shared the triumphs and sorrows which inevitably accompany them.

"I wish to declare with all earnestness that I do not want any religious ceremonies performed for me after my death. I do not believe in any such ceremonies and to submit to them even as a matter of form, would be hypocrisy and an attempt to delude ourselves and others.

"When I die, I should like my body to be cremated. If I die in a foreign country, my body should be cremated there and my ashes sent to Allahabad. A small handful of these ashes should be thrown into the Ganga and the major portion of them disposed of in the manner indicated below. No part of these ashes should be retained or preserved.

"My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious significance so far as I am concerned. I have no religious sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Ganga and the Jamuna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown.

"I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story

that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters.

"The Ganga, especially, is the River of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilisation, everchanging, everflowing, and yet ever the same Ganga.

"She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast. Smiling and dancing in the morning sunlight, and dark and gloomy and full of mystery as the evening shadows fall; a narrow, slow and graceful stream in winter, and a vast roaring thing during the monsoon, broad-bosomed almost as the sea, and with something of the sea's power to destroy, the Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, running into the present, and flowing on to the great ocean of the future.

"And though I have discarded much of past tradition and custom, and am anxious that India should rid herself of all the shackles that bind and constrain her and divide her people, and suppress vast numbers of them, and prevent the free

development of the body and the spirit, though I seek all this, yet I do not wish to cut myself off from the past completely.

"I am proud of that inheritance that has been, and is ours, and I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. The chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. And as witness of this desire of mine and as my last homage to India's cultural inheritance, I am making this request that a handful of my ashes be thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad to be carried to the great ocean that washes India's shore.

"The major portion of my ashes should, however, be disposed of otherwise. I want these to be carried high up into the air in an aeroplane and scattered from a height over the fields where the peasants of India toil, so that they might mingle with the dust and soil of India and become an indistinguishable part of India."





THE LEARNED BRAHMANS

In a certain town were four Brahmins who lived in friendship. Three of them had reached the far shore of all scholarship but lacked sense. The other found scholarship distasteful and had nothing but sense.

One day they met for consultation.



"What is the use of attainments," said they, "if one does not travel, win the favour of kings and acquire money? Whatever we do, let us all travel."

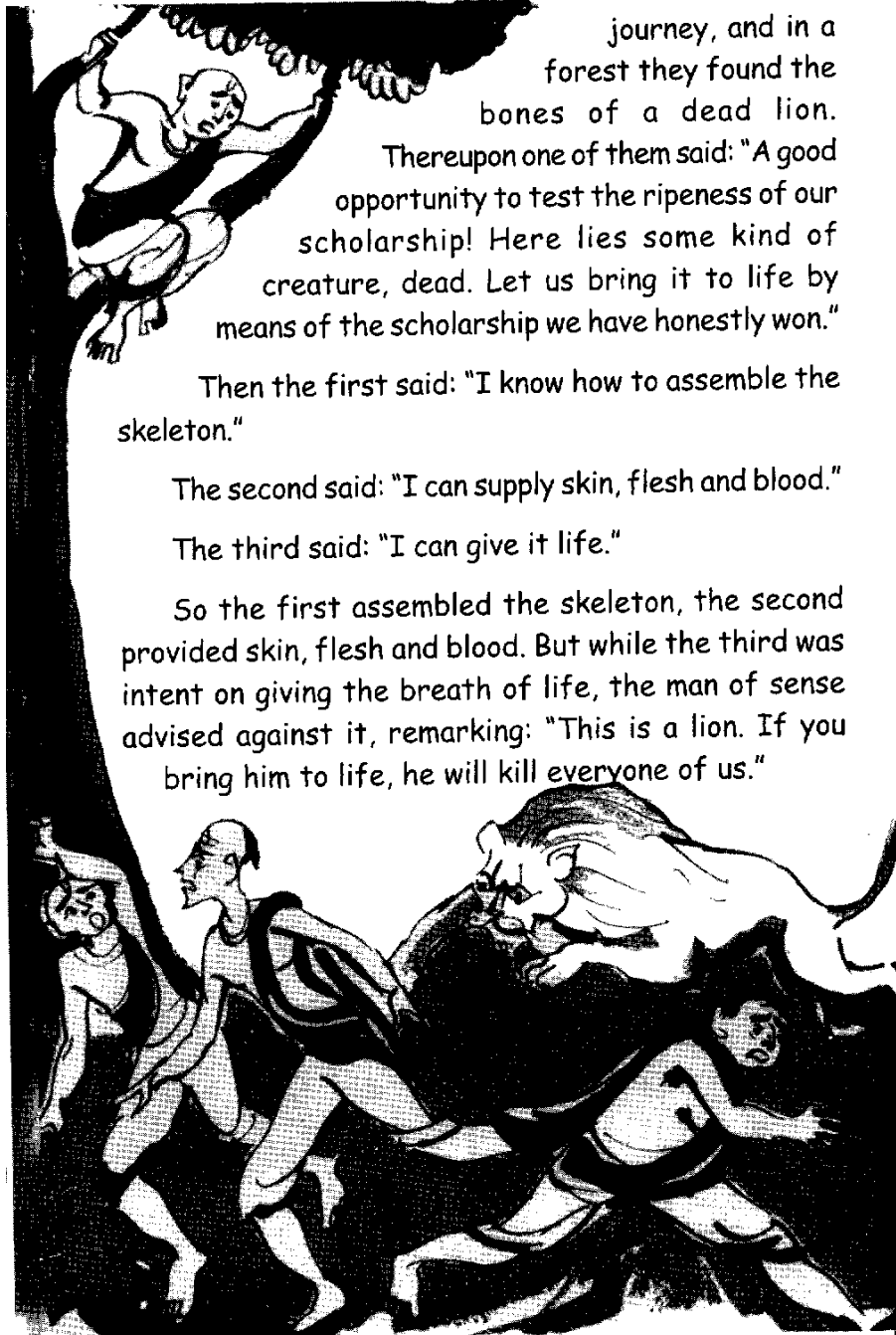
But when they had gone a little way, the eldest of them said: "One of us, the fourth, is a dullard, having nothing but sense. Now nobody, who is of simple sense and without scholarship, gains the favourable attention of kings. Therefore we will not share our earnings with him. Let him turn back and go home."

Then the second said: "My intelligent friend, you lack scholarship. Please go home."

But the third said: "No, no. This is no way to behave. For we have played together since we were little boys. Come along, my noble friend. You shall have a share of the money we earn."

With this agreement they continued their





journey, and in a forest they found the bones of a dead lion.

Thereupon one of them said: "A good opportunity to test the ripeness of our scholarship! Here lies some kind of creature, dead. Let us bring it to life by means of the scholarship we have honestly won."

Then the first said: "I know how to assemble the skeleton."

The second said: "I can supply skin, flesh and blood."

The third said: "I can give it life."

So the first assembled the skeleton, the second provided skin, flesh and blood. But while the third was intent on giving the breath of life, the man of sense advised against it, remarking: "This is a lion. If you bring him to life, he will kill everyone of us."

"You simpleton," said the others, "it is not we who will reduce scholarship to a nullity."

"In that case," came the reply, "wait a moment, while I climb this convenient tree."

When this had been done, the lion was brought to life, and it rose up and killed all three. But the man of sense, after the lion had gone elsewhere, climbed down and went home. And this is why

*Scholarship is less than sense;
Therefore seek intelligence;
Senseless scholars in their pride
Made a lion; then they died.*



YUDHISHTHIRA AND THE FAITHFUL DOG

King Yudhishtira called to him Prince Arjuna's grandson, the Prince Parikshit and, taking from his own head the crown of Hastinapura, Yudhishtira placed it on the head of his grand-nephew. Then, calling together his counsellors, he ordered them to issue throughout the length and breadth of the mighty Bharata kingdom this proclamation:

"King Yudhishtira has resigned the diadem of Hastinapura and King Parikshit, the son of Abhimanyu, the son

of Arjuna, has been crowned King in King Yudhishtira's stead."

Then, the five brothers and Queen Draupadi sacrificed to the immortal gods; and, after the gods had been gladdened by the sacrifice, King Yudhishtira clad himself in garments of bark and deer-skin. His brothers and Queen Draupadi did likewise. King Yudhishtira then turned his face to the East and set forth towards the rising sun. His brothers and Queen Draupadi followed him. As they started, King Yudhishtira's hunting dog joined them, and though the serving men would have driven him away, he refused to leave his master. King Yudhishtira rebuked the serving men and said: "The dog comes as a suppliant to my feet. And no Aryan King rejects the prayer of a suppliant. Let the dog also, therefore, come with us."

In this way, King Yudhishtira, his brothers, his



Queen, and the King's faithful hound set forth together from Hastinapura upon their last journey.

When Prince Arjuna set forth with King Yudhishtira, he slung across his shoulders the mighty Gandiva bow and its inexhaustible quiver. For, although his arms, chill with years, had no longer the strength to pull the bowstring, yet the Bharata prince would not part with the celestial weapon, which, in the years gone by had helped him to do such glorious deeds. As the King, his brothers, and their Queen walked towards the rising sun, they saw in front of them a column of golden fire. It came nearer and nearer and rose higher and higher, until it seemed to join



together earth and heaven. Then, a voice called to them from the column: "O princes of the great Bharat line! I am Agni, the fire god, and I have come to claim from Prince Arjuna the celestial bow which I begged for him in the olden time from Varuna, the sea-god. As Arjuna can no longer bend the sea-god's bow, let him take it to the seashore and cast it into the ocean. Thus to the sea-god will go back the sea-god's weapon."

Obedient to the fire-god, they walked over towards the rising sun, until they came to the shores of the eastern sea, which today, men call the Bay of Bengal. There, Prince Arjuna swung round his head the Gandiva bow and its inexhaustible quiver and, with all his strength, threw them far out into the sea. Varuna, the sea-god, seized them as they floated, and once again, he took the bow in his hand and fitted the quiver upon his mighty shoulders.

A longing came to King Yudhishtira to see the cool, white peaks and the pine-clad slopes of the Himalaya mountains. So, he marched northwards, until his eyes rested on the snow-clad ranges that guarded the land of the Aryan Kings. When they had climbed the southern foothills, Queen Draupadi grew weary and fell by the way.

"O King!" cried Prince Bhima, "Why has Queen Draupadi left us? Never in her life did she commit a sin. Why, then, has death claimed her before our



journey's end?"

King Yudhishtira answered without halting: "Queen Draupadi was the wife of us all, and she should have loved us all equally. But, better than all of us, she loved Arjuna, the archer. That was her sin, and for that she has been punished."

A few miles farther on, Sahadev's knees sank beneath him, and he fell motionless upon the ground.

"O King!" cried Prince Bhima, "my brother, Sahadev, who served thee faithfully all his life, has fallen to earth. He was without sin. Why, therefore, did death claim him before his journey's end?"

The King never paused in his march, but answered: "Sahadev served me faithfully; but, in his heart, he thought that he was wiser than I - nay, wiser than all

men. That was his sin, and for that he has been punished." Hardly had King Yudhishtira spoken, when Prince Nakula, the handsomest in face of all the brothers, fell forward and made no effort to raise himself.

"O King!" cried Prince Bhima, "My brother, Nakula, who surpasses us all in beauty of face, he died on the way. He was without sin. Why then, did death claim him before his journey's end?"

The King strode onwards and, without turning his head, replied: "He was in truth a just prince and worthy in every way of the great Bharat line. But, in his heart he thought that his fair face placed him high above all other men. That was his sin, and for that he has been punished."

The three remaining brothers walked on, without speaking, for a score of miles. Then, the tall and





graceful form of Prince Arjuna rolled helplessly in the snow.

"O King!" cried Prince Bhima, "Arjuna, thy brother, is dead, Arjuna the greatest archer in the world. What sin did he, the bravest and kindest of all, commit? And why has death claimed him before his journey's end?"

King Yudhishtira walked on a few steps in silence. Then he answered: "Arjuna promised me that he would destroy Duryodhan and his host in a second of time. But, he kept not his promise, for it was in idle boast. That was his sin, and for that he has been punished."

A league farther on, Prince Bhima felt his knees grow weak, and, for the first time in all his life, fear entered his mighty heart. For a few yards, he struggled on; then he sank to the earth. Looking towards Yudhishtira, he cried: "O king! I, Bhima thy last brother, am dying. What sin did I commit that I may not see our journey's end?"

Tears coursed down the King's bronzed cheek, for he loved Bhima best of all his brothers. Without

turning his head, but with broken voice, he answered: "Thy strength was great, but thy pride in it was greater still. For that thou art punished."

There remained with King Yudhishtira, out of all his companions, only his faithful hunting dog. With him the king walked slowly onwards until, at last, he saw in front of him an aerial chariot, in which sat a shining figure with a thousand eyes. King Yudhishtira, because of the thousand eyes, knew the figure to be that of the god Indra.

A moment later, the god said: "Oh Bharata king! Thou art weary with walking.

Enter my car, and in it I will drive thee swiftly to my celestial city, Amravati."

But the King answered: "Lord Indra: My brothers have fallen by the wayside. So, too, has Draupadi, my Queen. Unless thou wilt go back with me and take them with thee in thy car, I cannot enter it."

"O King!" said the god, "have no care for thy brothers or thy Queen. They have already reached Amravati, my city, before thee."

"Lord Indra," said King Yudhishtira, "I have with me my hunting dog, and he must come with me in thy car."

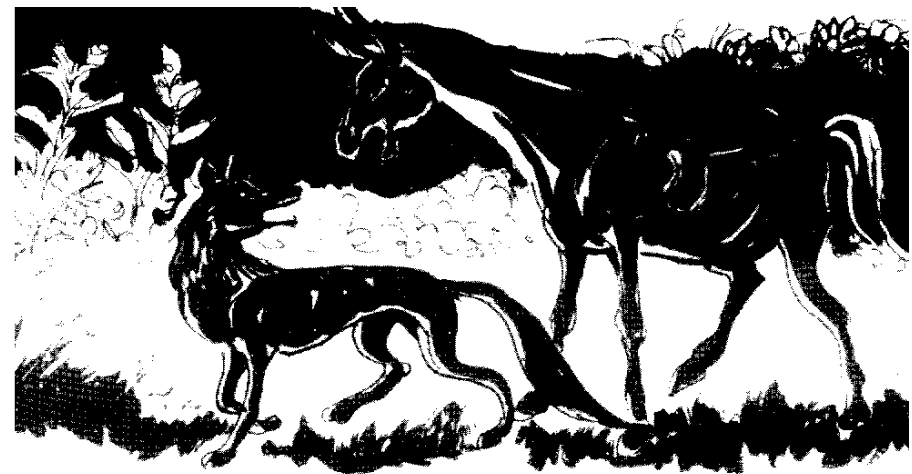
"O King!" said the god, Indra, and his thousand eyes looked scornfully at Yudhishtira, "I cannot

take a dog into my heaven. Leave him, therefore, behind thee and enter my car."

"Nay, Lord Indra," said the King,

"This dog came to me a suppliant when I set out on my journey. I am a Bharata king, and no Bharata king has ever flouted a suppliant. Unless thou permit my hunting dog to enter it with me, I cannot enter thy car."

The god, Indra, smiled on the King and said: "King Yudhishtira! I was but testing thy worth, and thou hast fully stood the trial. Enter thou my car and bring thy hound with thee."



THE MUSICAL DONKEY

In a certain town was a donkey named Prig. In the daytime he carried laundry packages, but was at liberty to wander anywhere at night. One night while wandering in the fields he fell in with a jackal and made friends. So the two broke through a hedge into some cucumber beds, and having eaten what they could hold of that comestible, parted at dawn to go home.

One night the egotistical donkey, standing among the cucumbers, said to the jackal: "See nephew, the night is fine. I will contribute a song. What sentiment shall my song express?"

"Don't uncle," said the jackal. "It might make trouble, seeing that we are on



thieves' business. Thieves and lovers should keep very quiet. As the proverb says:

*No sleepyhead
should pilfer fur,
No invalid,
rich provender,
No sneezer
wish to come to
grief.*

"Besides, your singing is not agreeable, since it resembles a blast on a conch shell. The farmers would hear you from afar, would rise, and would fether or kill you; better keep quiet and eat."

"Come, come," said the donkey. "Your remarks prove that you live



in the woods and have no musical taste. Did you ever hear this?

*"Oh, bliss if murmurs sweet to hear
Of music's nectar woo your ear
When darkness flees from moonlight clear
In autumn, and your love is near."*

"Very true, uncle," said the jackal, "But your bray is harsh. Why do a thing that defeats your own purpose?"

"Fool, fool," answered the donkey. "Do you think me ignorant of singing? Hear me on its systematisation.

*"Seven notes, three stales and twenty-one
Are modulations said to be;
Of pitches there are forty-nine
Three measures, also pauses three.*

*One hundred songs and eighty-five
Are found in song books perfect, pure
With all accessories complete,
Unblemished in their phrasing sure."*

"After that," the donkey preened himself, "how can you think me lacking in education? How can you prevent me from singing?"

"Very well, uncle," said the jackal, "I will stay in the hedge and watch for farmers. Sing to your heart's content."

The donkey lifted his neck and began to make

sounds. But the farmers, hearing the bray of a donkey, angrily clenched their teeth, snatched up their cudgels, rushed in and beat him so that he fell to the ground. Next they hobbled him by fastening on his neck a mortar with a convenient hole, and then went to sleep.

Presently the donkey stood up, forgetting the pain, as donkeys naturally do. Mortar on his neck, he trampled the hedge and began to run away. At this moment, the jackal looking on from a safe distance, said with a smile:

*"Well sung, uncle,
why would you
Not stop when
I told you to?
What a necklace,
yes, you wear
Music medals
rich and rare."*



A TOLA OF BLACK MUSTARD SEEDS

The Buddha was in his *sangha* when there came (so it is reported) a woman still young and beautiful, but beside herself with grief. For her only child, a son, had been bitten by a cobra and lay dead. And she cried upon the world and life and him, and she cried again and again and again: "Deliver unto me my child, my child! Deliver unto me my child, my child, my child!"

And when she came to the Buddha, he said to her:

"Do you not know, my sister, that all that which is born, must die?"

But she cried the more, and angry, cried:

"I did not come to you for metaphysic. I came to you, O Prophet, for my child. Deliver unto me my child, my child, my child!"

Then said the Buddha to her:

"Go, I pray you, into the houses of Magadha and bring me back a *tola* of black mustard seeds and ..."

The woman interrupting him, cried:

"I go, I go to bring you what will give me back my child!"

But the Buddha stopped her. "Stay," he cried. "Bring me back a *tola* of black mustard seeds from a house in which Death has not walked."

And she went willingly upon her way, for mustard seed was the commonest thing in all Magadha and a *tola* was so small



a thing that nobody was likely to deny her this.

But wherever she went, into the houses of the rich they charged her stand, and coldly spoke to her, for the rich do not wish to be reminded of the poor. And they said to her:

"Good woman, what would you have?"

And she crying said:

"A *tola*, my brother, a *tola*, my sister, for the love of God, a *tola* of black mustard seeds."

And they said to her:

"A *tola*? But you may have a bushel if you will be gone!"

But she stopped them, as they would have brought the bushel to her, and she said to them:

"Tell me, hath Death walked here?"

And they withdrew a little angrily and said to her:

"Three months ago we lost a cousin; six months ago, an uncle; six slaves have died these past three weeks."

And on and on they spoke as if Death were the wind that, careless, passed their window.

And she went from house to house, to houses of the very rich, and then the not-so-rich, but everywhere they gave the mustard seeds but still withheld that which she would have. For everywhere it seemed that Death had walked.

Then she went into the poor quarters with her



heart less high, for where the rich had failed her, certainly the poor would. But still she hoped, for hope is still the last friend of the desperate.

And here they opened up their doors more quickly, and smiled at her and, when they saw her sadness, gave her comfort. But she said to them:

"A *tola*, a *tola* of black mustard seeds."

And they cried: "But surely, two *tolas* if we have them!"

And some said: "We have but one but that we give you if it bring you back your son."

And when, the shadow falling on her face, yet young and lovely, she whispered, "But hath Death walked here?" they gave her back her grief in face with suffering worn.



They said: "What did you say, my sister! Our son was taken from us yesterday. A week ago we lost a girl, a little thing. A month ago a mother died and then a grandmother, a father and a husband and a wife ..."

But still she walked and asked, and still they gave her an answer as before.

And weary now, but still unconquered, she stood before the home of a wise old woman. The door swung open and the woman spoke:

"My sister, I know what you seek ... and it is not a handful of black mustard seeds. It is a word to give the Master who sent you forth upon a journey



seeking out a truth, such as he seeks himself. You are now at journey's end.

"Go back, therefore, and say to him: 'Lord, the dead are many and the living few'."

So she came back to the *sangha* and the Buddha met her.

He asked: "Have you brought the mustard seeds?"

She said: "Nay, Lord."

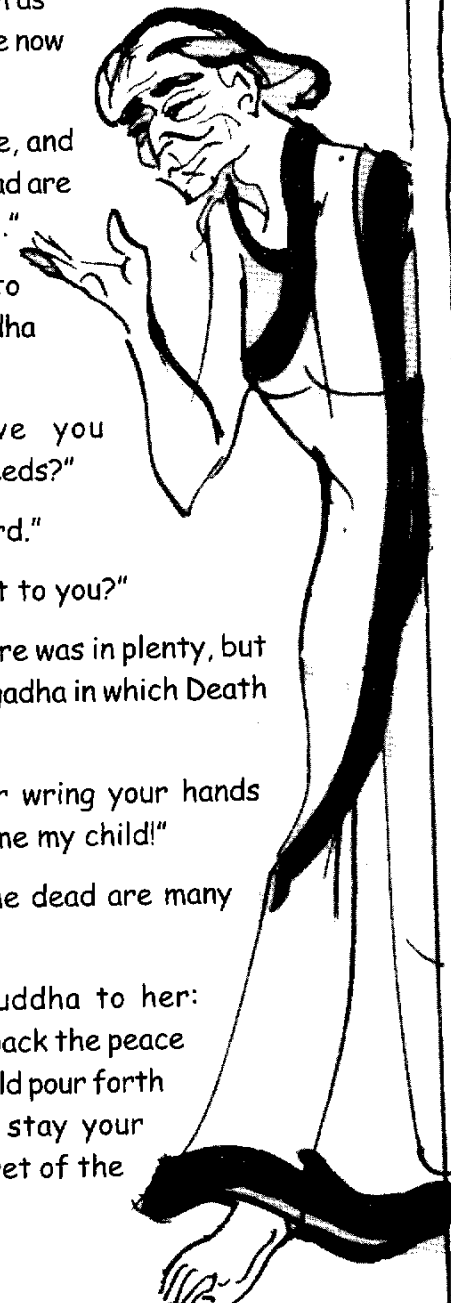
"Would none give it to you?"

"Mustard seed there was in plenty, but not one house in all Magadha in which Death had not walked."

"But you no longer wring your hands and cry: Deliver unto me my child!"

"Nay, Lord, for the dead are many but the living few."

Then said the Buddha to her: "Knowledge gives you back the peace that you had lost. I would pour forth my blood if it could stay your tears and win the secret of the



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curse that makes sweet love our anguish. We seek that secret, you as I. Go, my sister, bury you your child."



UMA: THE GOLDEN ONE

The gods had conquered the demons and had in consequence grown proud. They did not walk; they strutted about arrogantly. One day the three chief gods - Indra, king of heaven, Agni, god of fire, and Vayu, god of wind - were passing through a field. In the distance they saw a light.

"Agni, go and find out what that light is," commanded the other two. So Agni went. And the light spoke to him and said: "Who are you?"

Agni replied: "I am Agni, god of fire."

"Very well, what can you do?"

"I can burn up everything," replied the cocksure Agni.

"Good," replied the light, "then burn up this blade of grass."

Agni tried to do so but failed. Shamefacedly, he said to the other gods: "I could not find out what the light was."

Vayu, god of the wind, then went up to the light.

Again the light spoke. "Who are you?" it said.

"I am Vayu, god of the wind," he replied.

"Very well. What can you do?"

"I can blow away anything, anywhere," replied this cocksure one.



"Good! Then blow away this blade of grass."

Vayu huffed and he puffed, but he could not blow it away.

Shamefacedly, he too returned to the other two and said:

"I really can't tell what this light is."

It was then Indra's turn. But when he reached the spot, the light had vanished. In its place stood an exceedingly beautiful woman, with a golden complexion. She was richly dressed and heavily bejewelled.

"Fair one," cried the god, "Who are you?"

"I am Uma," replied the fair one, "and they call me that because I am golden."

"We saw a light that has now gone," Indra explained.



"Do you know where it has gone?" Uma spoke softly and it seemed merrily, too. "He was Brahma, the one God, the Sole Creator. He has now vanished."

Then, seeing Indra's bewilderment, she added: "Brahma cannot be known in full, yet all that we know is part of him. And this we know through his

mind. We cannot see him, but when we see anything, we see a portion of him which is his power. We cannot hear him, yet all natural and human things speak with his voice. We do not, cannot hear him, yet he hears us always. The way to happiness is through him. And to find that way, we must be restrained, of cultivated mind, of righteous action."

As she spoke, light dazzled from every limb of the golden one. She grew so bright that she blinded the king of heaven.

Indra trembled, fell at her feet and covered his eyes.

When he opened them, she had vanished. But the three erring gods never forgot the light that can blind those who think they see all things.



THE BUDDHA AND THE SHEPHERD BOY



Once, weary with suffering and much thought, Siddhartha fell to earth in a dead faint. And there came that way a shepherd boy who saw him.

*"With lids fast closed and lines of
nameless pain
Fixed on his lips ... the fiery noonday
sun
Beating upon his head ..."*

And the boy plucked branches of wild rose-apple trees, and knitted them thick into a bower to shade the holy face. Then he poured upon the Master's lips drops of warm milk, pressed from a goat's bag lest, being of low caste, he wrong one so high and holy-seeming.

And the Buddha, coming to, asked for milk from the shepherd's flask. But the boy cried: "Ah, my lord, I cannot give thee. Thou seest I am a Shudra and my touch defiles."

Then spake the Buddha so:

"Pity and need

*Make all flesh kin. There is no caste in blood
Which runneth of one hue, nor caste in tears,
Which trickle salt with all; neither comes man
To birth with tilak mark stamped on his brow,
Nor sacred thread on neck. Who doth right deeds,
Is twiceborn, and who doeth ill deeds, vile.
Give me to drink, my brother; when I come
Unto my quest it shall be good for thee."*

The shepherd's heart was glad, and glad he gave.



A GAME OF CHESS

A king of Sindh used to neglect his duties and spend all his time playing dice with his courtiers. Whenever he lost, the courtiers requested moderate grants of land or money.

The king thought that he was not losing much, but Sassa, an honest courtier, thought otherwise. Sassa invented the game of chess for his king. The king was so fascinated by it that he said to Sassa: "Ask for any reward you like. You shall have it."

"Sire," replied Sassa, "in that case, please give me a grain of rice for the first square on my chessboard, two for the next, four for the third, sixteen for the fourth, two hundred and fifty-six for the fifth,

and so on up to the sixty-fourth square, each succeeding square getting the square of the preceding."

"That's very moderate," commented the king.

"Sire," replied Sassa, "I want nothing more."

But the Prime Minister who had been ordered to give the requisite amount of grain to Sassa, came back the next day and said: "Sire, we cannot give Sassa what he is asking. We just don't have that amount of grain. It is a tremendous quantity; it will weigh as much as the Himalayas, and it will cost fifty million rupees."

The Prime Minister convinced the king of the accuracy of his calculations.

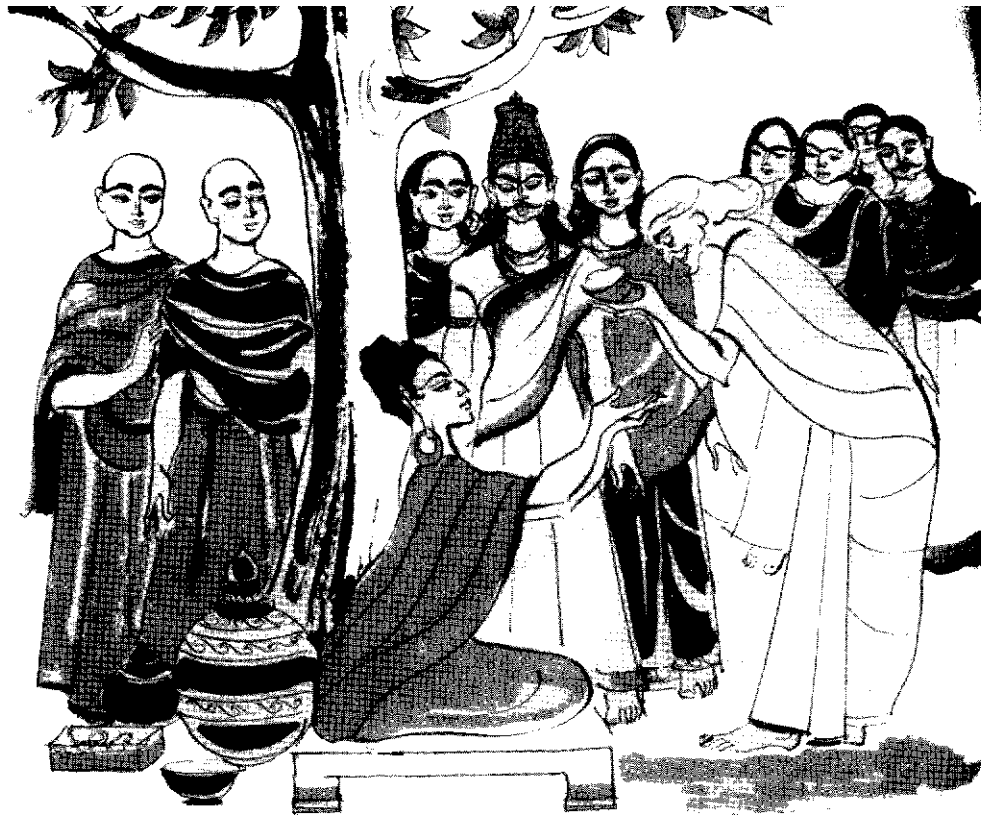
The king sent for Sassa. "What shall I do for

you now?" he asked. "I just don't have the amount of rice that you ask for."

"Sire," replied Sassa, "I withdraw my request. I made it only to show you how seemingly moderate demands can add up to a tremendous figure. Your flattering courtiers were ruining the kingdom."

The king was pleased with Sassa. He drove out his greedy courtiers and made Sassa a minister. Sassa helped him to rule Sindh with efficiency and vigour.





THE OLD WOMAN AND HER HALF-POMEGRANATE

The Buddha was once in Raja Griha where he had allotted a day for the collection of alms. Now he sat under a tree and began to receive gifts.

King Bimbisara had brought with him deeds of land, houses and other valuable properties. There followed

Prince Ajata Shatru with rich and valuable gifts. Finally, came grandees and wealthy merchants.

The Buddha accepted their gifts by extending his right hand in token of them.

Suddenly there came into the procession an old, shrivelled woman and she said to him sadly:

"Lord, I heard about your appeal for charity only this morning. As you see, I am poor and old and I have nothing to give except this pomegranate. I had eaten half of it when I heard of your appeal. Lord, I have nothing to give but this half-pomegranate, so I brought it with me. Will you accept this?" She looked appealingly at the Buddha.

To the astonishment of all the powerful and wealthy persons, the Buddha at once came down and accepted her gift with both hands and in deep gratitude.

King Bimbisara, Prince Ajata Shatru and all present were greatly surprised.

"O, blessed one," said Bimbisara, "why do you so coldly acknowledge our gifts by merely extending your hand when we gave so much? And, why did you come down from your dais to acknowledge this woman's gift when she gave merely half a piece of fruit?"

"Because, King," the Buddha replied evenly, "she gave all that she had. The rest of you gave only a part of what you had."



BIRBAL: THE WIT

In the reign of Akbar, the Great Mughal, there lived at court Raja Birbal, a man of high lineage, who made



proverbs as others did mistakes. Much of the Birbal wit has now passed into the legendry of north India. One reads between the lines for Birbal: there is always a concealed element of fun, sometimes at the expense of the Emperor who was always big enough to take the laugh against himself. Here are some of the most celebrated stories.

Once Akbar sent for Birbal and said: "Count how many crows there are in Delhi and let me know within a month." Birbal bowed low and gave a deep salaam. "Sire," he said, "I have done that already. There are six thousand, five hundred and fifty-two crows in Delhi." Akbar started.

"And if there were one more or less, Raja Birbal?" he asked.

"Sire," came the prompt reply, "if one counts the crows and finds the number to be greater, one would know that the relations of some of them have come; if the number is found to be less, it would

mean that some have gone to see their friends and relatives." Thus did he play on the Indian weakness for "placing" relatives or being "placed" by them.

The Shah of Persia had heard of Birbal's intelligence and he wrote to Akbar requesting that Birbal be allowed to visit his court. Akbar was pleased, because he was extremely proud of Birbal, and sent him to the Persian court in splendour.

As soon as Birbal reached the Persian capital, he was sent for by the Shah. When he reached the audience chamber, he saw a semi-circular arrangement of seats. In each was a glittering figure and all the figures were dressed exactly alike. Any one of them could have been the Shah. Birbal stopped a while, then looked round keenly and went and bowed to the real Shah.

Taken aback, the Shah listened to Birbal's flowery address and replied in the same flowery language. Then he asked: "Birbal, how did you recognise me?" To which Birbal replied: "Sire, when I looked round I found everyone looking at you. Only you did not look at anyone. I knew at once who the real Shah was." The Shah bestowed upon Birbal the title "Ocean of Intelligence," by which men knew him ever after.

"Birbal," said Akbar to his unlicensed jester once, "tell me, what is the difference between truth

and falsehood?" "Sire, four inches," replied Birbal instantly.

"How so?" said Akbar.

"Your Majesty," came the swift reply, "we hear with our ears and see with our eyes. What we see is the truth, not what we hear. The distance between the eye and the ear is four inches. Hence the difference between truth and falsehood is four inches."

"Very true," laughed the Padshah.





THE GOOD AND THE BAD VILLAGES

A great reformer of the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak, like the weaver, Kabir, is often described as a people's religious leader. Full of that deep common sense that is irresistible to those

who have heard much subtle argument, the stories told about Guru Nanak have an almost modern flavour.

Once Nanak was travelling, accompanied by a disciple named Mardana. They came across a village where the people were inhospitable. The two holy men were given neither food nor shelter. On leaving the village, Guru Nanak said: "May this village always be here!"

Soon after, they came to another village. The villagers here were extremely kind and courteous to their guests. They were looked after, fed well and made comfortable. On leaving the village, Guru Nanak said: "May this village be destroyed and its people scattered all over the earth!" Mardana was astonished. "Sir," he said to Guru Nanak, "when you left the bad village, you wished it well. Now, when you leave this good village, where the people have tried so hard to make us feel at home, you wish that it is destroyed. Isn't that strange?"

"Not at all, my boy, not at all," replied Guru Nanak with a smile. "When I left the good village, I wanted its inhabitants to be spread out all over the world, to shed sweetness and light. And when I forsook the bad one, I expressed the wish that its meanness of spirit might forever be confined to a small place."

TWO INDIAN LEGENDS: A COMMENTARY

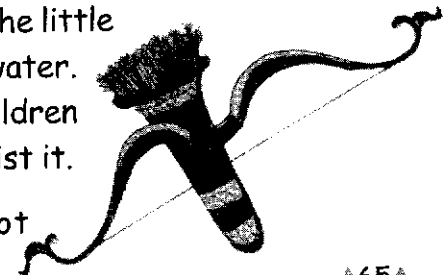
The two legends of Ganga, the River Maid, and Yudhishtira and the Faithful Dog, are distinctively Indian and Hindu.

For the non-Indian child, the closest parallel to them lies in Greek mythology. In both, there is a sense of space and things and people so large that the human eye cannot take them in at a glance. All power is displayed on a gigantic scale. Indra has a thousand eyes, Ganga nestles in an ice cavern in the Himalayas in the god Shiva's beard. Yudhishtira and his brothers wander across the thousand miles of Aryavarta (India) first to the rising sun, which is the Bay of Bengal, then to the west and finally along the

Indo-Gangetic Plain to the remote snow-clad Himalayas. Arjuna's bow is the mighty Gandiva bow (with its inexhaustible quiver of arrows), that once belonged to the gods, and that was brought to him by the fire-god, Agni, acting on behalf of Varuna, the sea-god. The total picture is one of sweeping space that takes in the oceans of the world, vast stretches of land, natural and supernatural forces at play shaping the lives of men, decreeing their ends, and the constant communion between the gods and man on a stage as large as Earth, on which they periodically and dramatically meet.

In Ganga we have a scene not unlike that of Persephone; only more is asked of Ganga than of Ceres' daughter. There is no mourning in the house of Himavat when his daughter exchanges her cherished ice cavern for the dusty plains of the earth to save human life by bringing water to man. It is not an accident that though her parents cannot persuade Ganga to go to the rescue of men, and though the cries of men do not move her, the sight of the small dying child revived by a drop of water from her hair touches the virtue of compassion in her. She goes to bring joy to the little ones who die for lack of water. The appeal is made by children to a child who cannot resist it.

What follows is not



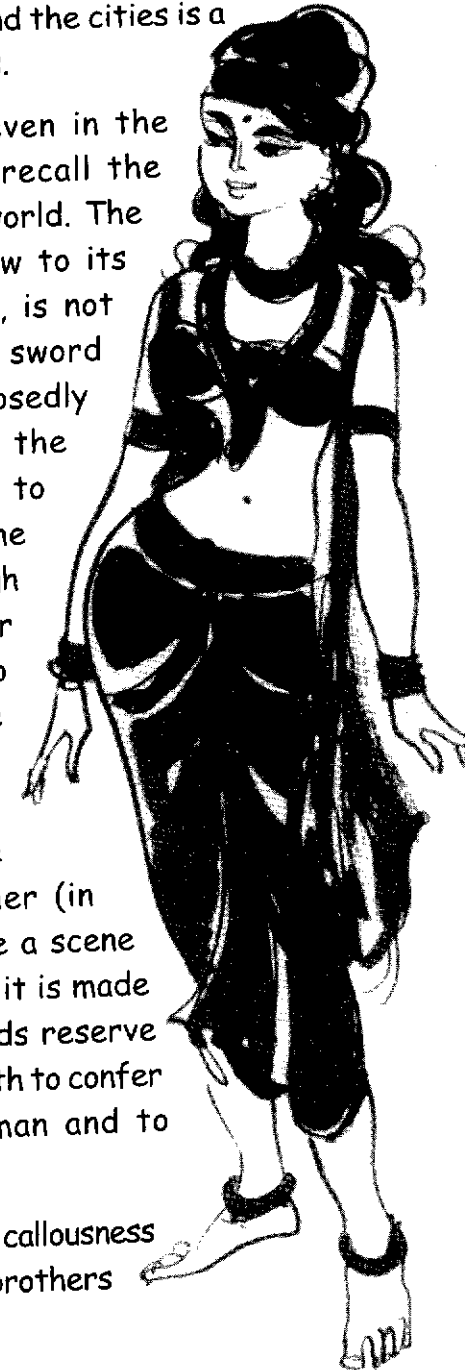


unlike the Persephone story. At the approach of Persephone, as of Ganga, the world grows green again, buds sprout, flowers cover the earth. But the distinctively Indian part of the story lies in the moral. To give oneself for others is duty; to spread happiness around one's steps for others to gather up is truest joy. Where the Greek conception is one of natural and human beauty, the Indian idea is essentially moral and beneficial. It is the dominant idea in the feminine tradition in India. Girls and women exist to give and to please. To do this is their duty. In spreading happiness lies their reward. To this day, the average traditional Indian

woman of the countryside and the cities is a giver. The tradition persists.

There are passages even in the Yudhishtira story that recall the legends of the European world. The return of the Gandiva bow to its original owners, the gods, is not unlike the return of the sword Excalibur, that was supposedly given to King Arthur, to the river. Arjuna's reluctance to return the bow even when he cannot use it, is human enough and not unlike Sir Bedevere's unwillingness to part with Excalibur that he was unable to use. But Arjuna bows to the will of the gods, and where the gods and the aged archer (in particular) meet, we have a scene of tragic pathos in which it is made clear to men that the gods reserve to themselves the right both to confer superhuman power on man and to withdraw it.

Yudhishtira's seeming callousness towards his queen and his brothers



requires explanation. In the event it appears that he did love them rather as Cordelia (forced to declare herself in a historic scene) loved Lear - no more, no less than they deserved. Yudhishtira walks on without turning his head or looking back over his shoulder, as they fall, except in the case of Bhima, the beloved brother. As the tears course down Yudhishtira's face, he comes nearer being the normal man and possibly (for this reason), travels further from the gods. Of all the brothers, Yudhishtira is the only one who has consciously committed no sin. He is the model upon which men must make themselves, the symbol of the perfect man, just, above all things, but not without the humanity that the strong may sometimes feel for the less strong. To the hunting dog notably, he returns the loyalty that loyal service deserves. His conception of how a man must live and die is social rather than personal or private. Duties are owed, and must be performed. Debts are incurred, and must be paid.

It is a point that as each of the brothers (and the queen) falls, the remaining travellers turn always to Yudhishtira for the explanation of the fall. He is supposedly the most knowledgeable of them, the one most in the confidence of the gods, i.e. the one nearest godhead.

And when finally Yudhishtira meets the god Indra in his resplendence, and may be expected to

seem small by comparison with a god, he loses not a whit of his kingly stature. He is a man, true, but a king, and he addresses Indra with the same pride that Porus displayed in his encounter with the victorious Alexander. Indra has not the power to tempt a Bharata king to do otherwise than Yudhishtira's own knowledge and experience have taught him to do. So Indra bows to Yudhishtira, not vice versa, as the perfect man and his hunting dog enter into the joy of their "masters."

The size of the drama, the forces and characters, the stage, the strengths and weaknesses of the gods and men with which this story is replete would seem to rule out everyday criticism, for we have here the dimensions of the epic-allegory. If Yudhishtira lacks a quality, it is humour. But then it might be argued that Siegfried was not noticeably laughter-loving and that, Loki apart, the gods of the Nordic Valhalla took themselves almost as seriously as the gods of the Hindu pantheon, and the men who, like Yudhishtira, fashioned themselves upon the gods.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muriel Wasi was educated at the University of Madras, where she took a Triple First Class and topped the Presidency lists for the year 1933, and at the University of Oxford. She taught at Maharani's College, Bangalore (University of Mysore). During World War II, she served in the Directorates of Military Public Relations and Public Liaison in South India, Assam and Delhi, editing three war journals. In 1952 she joined the Union Ministry of Education, edited *The Education Quarterly* for several years and served here and on deputation to the National Council of Educational Research and Training for eighteen years. She worked as Consultant in Area Studies to the US Office of Education twice: once on behalf of the Government of India in New York in 1964-65, and later in a personal capacity in Indiana in 1971-72. After her retirement from the Government of India in 1970 as Deputy Educational Adviser, Muriel Wasi taught English at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and the Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi (on whose Governing Board she has served) for three and a half, and five years respectively. She also wrote and broadcast regularly.

Her other published works are: *The Romance of Teaching*; *Bricks and Mortar*; *Transition*; *The Educated*; *Too High for Rivalry* (an educational novel); *Living and Learning* (an educational credo); the edited volumes *Twelve English Essays* and *Literacy Manual for Field Workers*; and *Woman in Indian Society Today* of which she was General Editor and chief contributor.